DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 549 SO 021 770

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TITLE Thinking about Art History as an Inquiry Course.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art Criticism; *Art Education; *Art History; Artists; Higher Education; *Independent Study; *Inquiry; *Integrated Curriculum; Language Arts; *Research Skills; Secondary Education; Social Studies; Visual Arts

ABSTRACT

An inquiry method for learning art history assumes that students will be more interested if they conduct their own research about artists, works of art, and cultures. The collection of the following types of information will help guide their inquiry: description of the work of art, techniques and materials used, where the artist lived, purpose of the artist or patron, education of the artist and influential teachers, culture at the time of creation, and other things or events that influenced the artist. Students can locate some of this information in traditional art textbooks but other methods can encourage them to look further. Files should be created using magazine/newspaper articles, reproductions of works of art, museum catalogs, and leaflets. These files can be expanded to by the students. Study of art history also can be correlated with other subjects including social studies and language arts. (KM)

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Thinking About Art History As An Inquiry Course

by
Virginia L. Fitzpatrick
University of Cincinnati, 1991

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Traditionally the history of art has been taught through teacher-led lectures or short papers about artists presented by students. This presentation includes other methods of student learning about art and artists that have proven to interest students in both elementary and secondary schools. The inquiry method of learning historical information about art assumes that students will be more interested if (1) they are participants in gathering the information and (2) the information relates to people and cultures as well as art.

Contextual information about the world in which art is created offers a wide avenue of exploration. Information about the artist, the artist's family and friends, and the society in which he or she lived, offers insights about works of art that help explain symbols, shapes, designs, patterns, subject matter, and materials.

A way of investigating and organizing this information is by looking for intrinsic information, that is, information that can be found in the work and by searching for contextual information that is found outside of the work concerning the society of the artist, and social, political, or economic factors that influenced the creation of the work of art. The starting point for both methods of investigation and organizing of information is the work of art and the authenticity of the artist. The following is a list of some types of information.

Figure 1

Description of the work: including subject matter, the authenticity of the artist, location, size, condition, symbols

Techniques and materials used to create this work

Who the artist(s) was, when he/she lived and where

Purpose/intent of the artist

Education of the artist and influential teachers

Culture at the time of creation

Influences on the artist

To locate this information students go beyond traditional art textbooks to books about history, archeology, and the social sciences. They use magazines representing many different social and medical sciences including National Geographic, Smithsonian, JAMA, and JAVA. Because most students are not able to do research outside of their classroom or school library, files are made for their use. Teachers and parents collect magazines and newspaper articles, museum catalogs and leaflets, and reproductions that supply answers to questions developed by the students about art and artists. Students and teachers add photocopied information about art and artists for their own research. Young children add to the files which are labeled with pictures.

Students organize their research with using the model of art

historians' activities while they search for information about works of art. The Getty Art History Information Program and the Institute for Research in Information and Scholarship at Brown University (Bakewell, Beeman, & Reese, 1988) sponsored research on what art historians do during the course of their investigations.

Figure 2

* describe works of art and reconstruct verbally their original appearance if possible
* compare other work by the artist and compare it with other artists who worked on the same theme, at the same time in similar cultures, or who had similar or different styles
* analyze information pertaining to the appearance of the work, construction techniques, and to the artist and patrons
* interpret the meaning intended by the artist and understood within his or her culture
* synthesize their findings for the understanding and further interpretation of others
* present their findings in verbal or written forms

While they are looking at reproductions of art, students develop their own questions based on Figure 1. Teachers guide student research by the outline in Figure 2. Other methods of involving students in inquiry include using games and paper activities that require students to think about or search information files. (see sample 1 based on Henry O. Tanner)

For evaluation of the learning of young children,

enlargements of art and scenes from the life of the artist and his or her schools, are mounted on 11" x 14" boards and laminated. Students tell the story of the art and artist while lining these up in the correct chronological order. Presentation formats vary according to time and the interest and abilities of students. Talk show, dramas, mini museums are a few ideas used by many teachers. Other ideas can be developed by the students as they learn about problems and situations in the lives of the artists they study.

Study of the history of art can be correlated with social studies and language arts if time is at a premium or it can be correlated with creative studio work that relates to the style and methods of the artist being studied. Research by art teachers has shown that combining the study of art history with other studio areas increases the learning of both subjects.

Learning about the history of art through their own inquiry is more interesting then lectures to students and helps them understand the activities of art historians. It offers opportunities to students who can not, or think that they can not, create art with traditional media. It broadens their understanding of art and artists over the world and through vast periods of time.

Reference:

Bakewell, E., Beeman, W.O., Reese, C.M. (1988). Object, Image, Inquiry: The Art Historian at Work. Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Art History Information Program.

INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC FACTORS

1. **DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK**

   What is it? When was it created? How was it created? What is the subject matter? What medium was used? What are its dimensions? What stylistic characteristics are apparent? What is the meaning of the symbols in this piece? What is its condition?

2. **ARTIST**

   Who created it? Where did the artist live? Why?

3. **PURPOSE/INTENT OF ARTIST, PATRON**

   Why was it created? What was its function? What was the intent of the artist? What did the artist say about this piece?

4. **INFLUENCES AND COMMENTS OF OTHERS, CRITIQUES**

   How did others influence the artist? What were the critiques of this piece? How did other art influence the creation of this piece?

5. **INFLUENCE OF HOME/CULTURE**

   How did the time period in which the artist lived affect the work? How did the artist's family affect the artist?

6. **EDUCATION OF ARTIST**

   With whom did the artist study art making? What else did the artist study besides art? Where was the artist educated and at what time? Was the school noted for educating other artists?

7. **CULTURE/POLITICS AT TIME WORK WAS CREATED**

   How did the culture and its politics affect the artist? What was the connection to the artist's work?

8. **TECHNOLOGY**

   How did technology affect the creation of the work? How was it reflected in the subject of the work?

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